THE ASANTE BEFORE 1700

by Kwasi Boaten*

PEOPLING OF ASANTE

The name Asante appeared for the first time in any European literature at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This was the time when some Akan clans came together to form a kingdom with Kumase as their capital, some few years earlier. This apparently new territory was not the original home of the Asante. Originally all the ancestors of the Asante lived at Adanse/Amansie.[1] The above assertion does not agree with Eva Meyerowitz's[2] view that the Akan formerly lived along the Niger bend in the regions lying roughly between Djenne and Timbucto. There is no evidence to support such mass migrations from outside.[3]

Adanse is therefore an important ancestral home of many Twi speakers. The area is traditionally known in Akan cosmogony as the place where God (Odomankoma) started the creation of the world,[4] such as the ideas of the clan and kinship. Furthermore, Adanse was the first of the five principal Akan states of Adanse, Akyem Abuakwa, Assen, Denkyira and Asante (The Akanman Piesie Num) in order of seniority.[5]

Evidence of the above claim for Adanse is shown by the fact that most of the ruling clans of the Akan forest states trace their origins to Adanse. The Asona who founded Edweso (Ejisu) and Ofeso in Asante and the Akyem Abuakwa state claim that they originated from Kokobiante, near Sodua, a small village which existed between Akrokyere (Akrokere) and Dompoase. The Assen both of the Asenie of Atandasu (Fante Nyankomase) and the Asona of Apemanim, also the Afutuakwa of Fosu and the Aboabo of Assen Nyankomase trace their original homes to that stretch of territory between the Pra river and the Kusa range. Their most renowned sites being Nimiaso and Apagya for the Atandasu and Ansa for Apemanim. The Agona who founded the kingdom

---

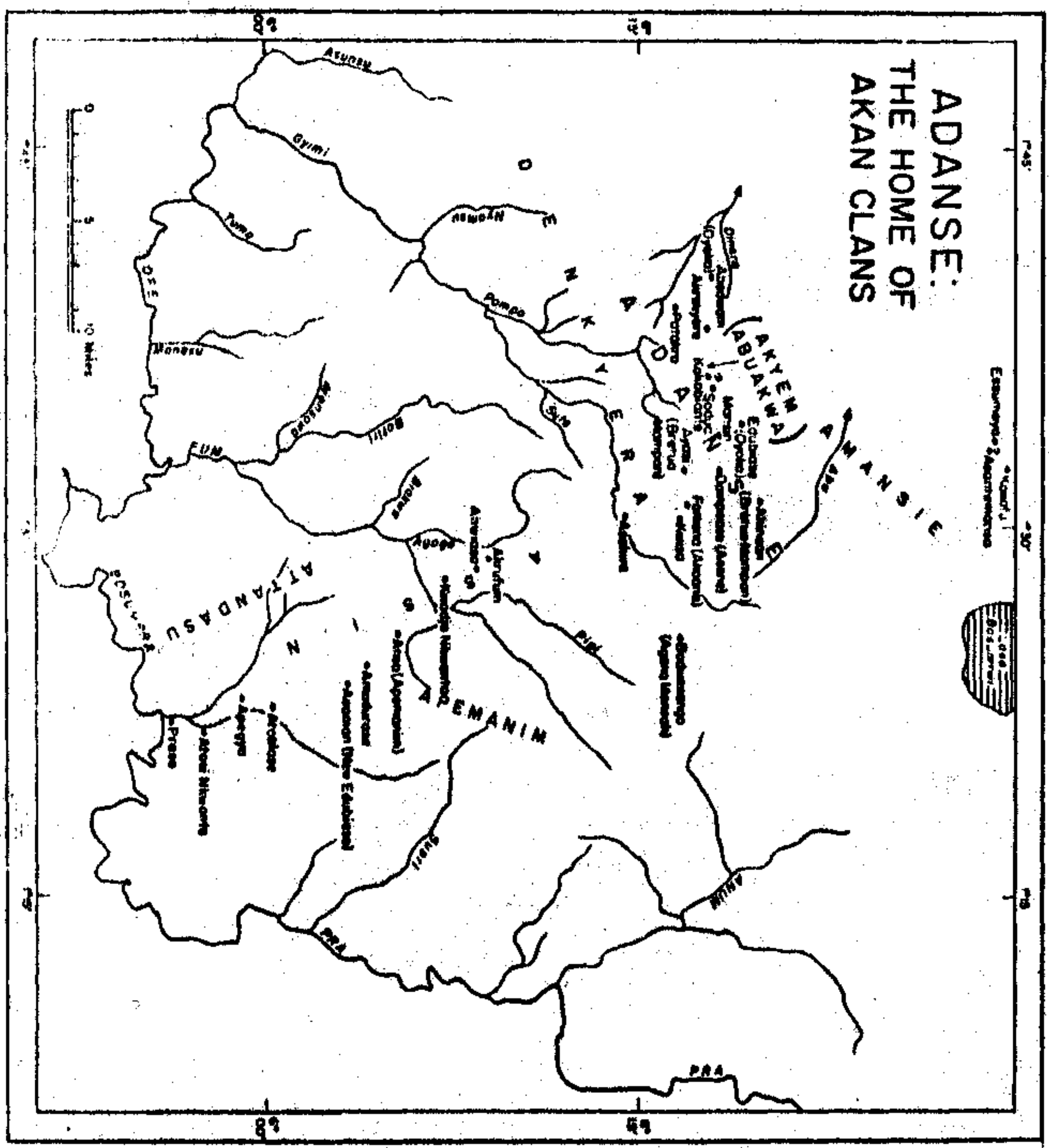
* Lecturer in Geography, University of Ghana, Legon.

of Denkyira were once known to have occupied that land stretching from Asokwa westward to the neighbourhood of Obuase and Akrofuom to the confluence of the Oda and the Ofe rivers, when the capital Abankesieso was situated. The Bretuo of Mampon and Kwau trace their home to Ayaase and Ahensan, while Abadwam and Edubiase are known to be the early homes of the Oyoko clan. Finally the Ekona of Fomena claim to have originated from Adanse (Fig. 1). This place then could be said to have nurtured most of the important Akan clans. It is noteworthy that beyond Adanse all stories of migrations and modes of travel tend to be ill-supported, hazy and, by and large, unintelligible.

Adanse area could reasonably be identified on the "Dutch map of the Gold Coast 1629" as Acanij, where "lived the most principal merchants who trade gold with us".[6] It is from this place that the clans which later on founded the Kingdom of Asante migrated northwards. It must be emphasized that at the time of their movement northwards, the ancestors of the Asante had acquired many of their characteristics that made them identifiable as a people with identical aspirations and mode of life.

There is no written literature to support the time when the clans began to move from Adanse, but it must be after 1629. None of the states in Asante appeared on the Dutch map of the Gold Coast. The only place which seemed to have been known at the coast by that time was (Taffoe) Tafo. It is probable that the people started to move northwards after the death of the third King of Denkyira, Aha, in about 1632.[7] The movement of the ancestors of the Asante is associated with the rise of Denkyira because this new power in the neighbourhood of Adanse (refer Fig. 1) was apparently a threat to the peace of their neighbours. Especially the reign of the sixth King of Denkyira, Wesempe-Ampem, (1640s) who had at his disposal a powerfully organized state army,[8] must be a decisive period for the mass movement of these clans northwards.

The reasons for these migrations northwards are probably complex. The traditions among the Asante appear to attribute the thrust northwards to two basic causes: dynastic disputes and over-population. For example, the Bretuo of Mampon were reputed to have left Ahensan because


ADANSE:
THE HOME OF
AKAN CLANS
AKYEM ABUAKWA
AMANSIE
DENKYERA
ASSIN
ATTANDASU
PRA
FUM
ANUM
Gyimi
Pompo
Offin
0 5 10 Miles

of a disputed succession.[9] Bonwere tradition also claims that they left Adanse because of a disputed succession.[10] On the other hand, the Kumawu say that they left Asumenya because of a population explosion which resulted in an acute shortage of farming and hunting land.[11]

These are the factors which the various traditions give for the migrations that took place. For the purpose of classification we may say that these factors were internal. Apart from the internal causes some people have put forth other reasons for the migrations of the ancestors of the Asante. One such person is Ivor Wilks who thinks that the fundamental factors underlying these migrations were external. He puts forth two hypotheses as being the factors for the migrations northwards. In the first place he thinks that the migration of the ancestors of Asante was a result of the extension of the trade route from Begho. Secondly, he argues that what made possible the thrust to the north "is only to be understood with reference to southern factors such as the influence of Akwamu and the importance of European traders, as the purveyors of guns".[12] These two factors seek to emphasize the importance of commerce in the northward movement of the ancestors of the Asante.

Fynn, writing on this, asserts that the above thesis is unsatisfactory because it underestimates the political and economic revolution which had taken place in this part of West Africa. He thinks that if the Adanse immigrants had been commercially minded, they would have turned southwards and not northwards for the realization of their objective.[13] To him the movement of these people northward was a direct consequence of the emergence of Akyem, Akwamu and Denkyira as powerful states in the hinterland of the Gold Coast. The upheaval which followed the rise and consolidation of these states hastened the complete disintegration of old Adanse state and thereby created an atmosphere of apprehension and unsettlement of peoples from that state to all parts of the country.

In the author's view the movement of the ancestors of the Asante from Adanse/Amansie northward was the result of the interplay of several factors, (which were internal and external). The major factor was the political atmosphere of the Adanse area, as a result of the emergence of the Akwamu,

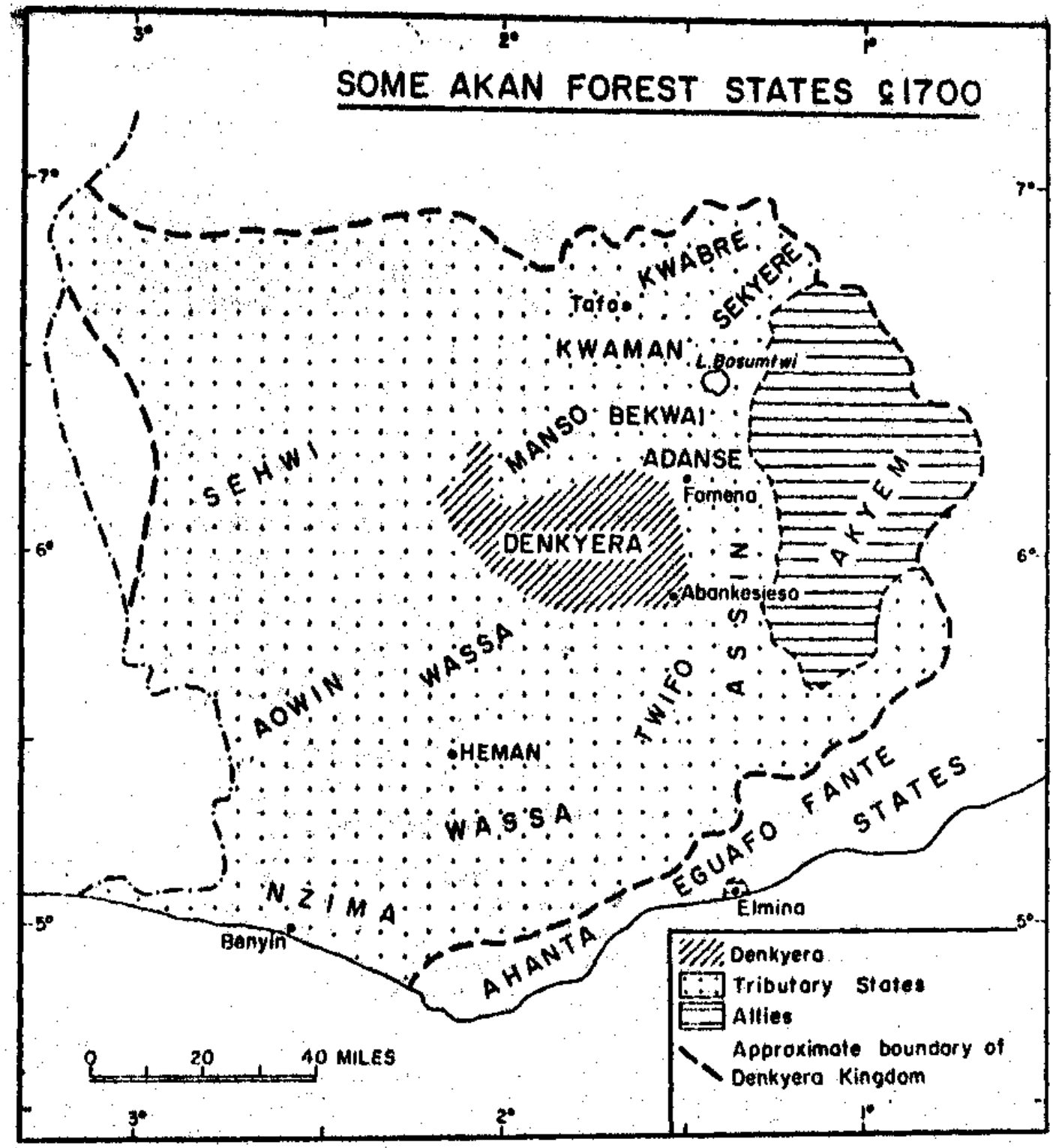
the Akyem and the most important the Denkyira. It appears that the "numerous enterprising or discontended families"[14] moved northwards because of political pressures emanating from those southern states. Thus a strong element of self-preservation entered into the calculations of the ancestors of the Asante, for they either had to stay in Adanse and be made slaves by the military states being created in the south or move northwards into comparative freedom. This view seemed to have been emphasized by Fynn while he rejected the economic factor put forth by Wilks. Fynn writes: "this thesis is unsatisfactory because it underestimates the political and economic revolution which had taken place in this part of West Africa".[15] The author believes that such an extreme view is rather unfortunate, and that even though commerce was not the prime factor it did play a part in the movement of the ancestors of the Asante from Adanse area as put forward by Wilks. Commercial minded as they had been the congregation of these immigrants around Tafo should be a significant factor that must not be rejected outright, because Tafo was known to be rich in gold and should be able to attract these people who knew the importance of gold in the then trade to the south. This leads to the second factor of Wilks, that is the influence of the European trade. These people might have moved out to a place where conditions were favourable for an effective participation of this trade, of course, in their home area they were too close to the trade-minded, well established states of Denkyira, Akwamu and Akyem.

The third factor which was internal was due to population pressure in Adanse and Amansie. This factor might have led to stool disputes which were rife among the clans in Adanse, because as their numbers increased, the most powerful personalities might have dreamed of building kingdoms, that could be as powerful as those of Denkyira and Akwamu. The importance of this hypothesis lies in the fact that when they moved some clan leaders succeeded in building powerful states such as Dwaben, Mampon and Ofeso. This idea of organisation of state might have been copied from these southern states.[16] It is the view of the author that it was the interplay of the above factors in varying degrees, that influenced the ancestors of the Asante to move away from Adanse/Amansie districts.

It is strange that these clans only moved to the north. A closer look at the distribution of states in those days (Fig. 2) would show that the only chance opened to the immigrants was the north where there were comparatively less powerful states. The Guan who lived in the environs of Kwabere and Sekyere (where the ancestors of the Asante moved) were not powerful enough to resist the movement of these invaders, who knew the gun warfare.

There appeared to be two ways by which the people moved: some migrated on a larger scale as a whole settlement decamped, en masse, and settled in new areas. This was what occurred with the migration of the people of Mampon, Nsuta and Kumawu.[17] All these groups were led by powerful individuals who later became founders of the various settlements. Others also moved in small numbers but in clans which included the branches of the Ekoona, the Aduana, the Asenee etc. It appears that the Ekoona, the Aduana, the Asenee etc. moved first; the last two to move were the Bretuo and the Oyoko in that order. The early Twi speaking states to be established by these clans were Kaase, Amakom, Tafo, Wonoo, etc. all around modern Kumase. It was left to the Oyoko hegemony to unite them into the Kumase State of Asante.

Up to this time the impression so far created may be that the immigrants moved into an empty territory and just took possession of the land. Indeed the land was peopled, however sparse and these immigrants from Adanse had to fight with the old inhabitants of the land, to get some land on which to settle. Oral tradition collected from these people supports the idea that the Asante met some people. There is archaeological evidence to show that modern Asante area had been peopled for a long time, (however scanty the population had been). Dickson[18] in his book vividly discusses the various phases of the cultural history of Ghana as a whole. His map (after

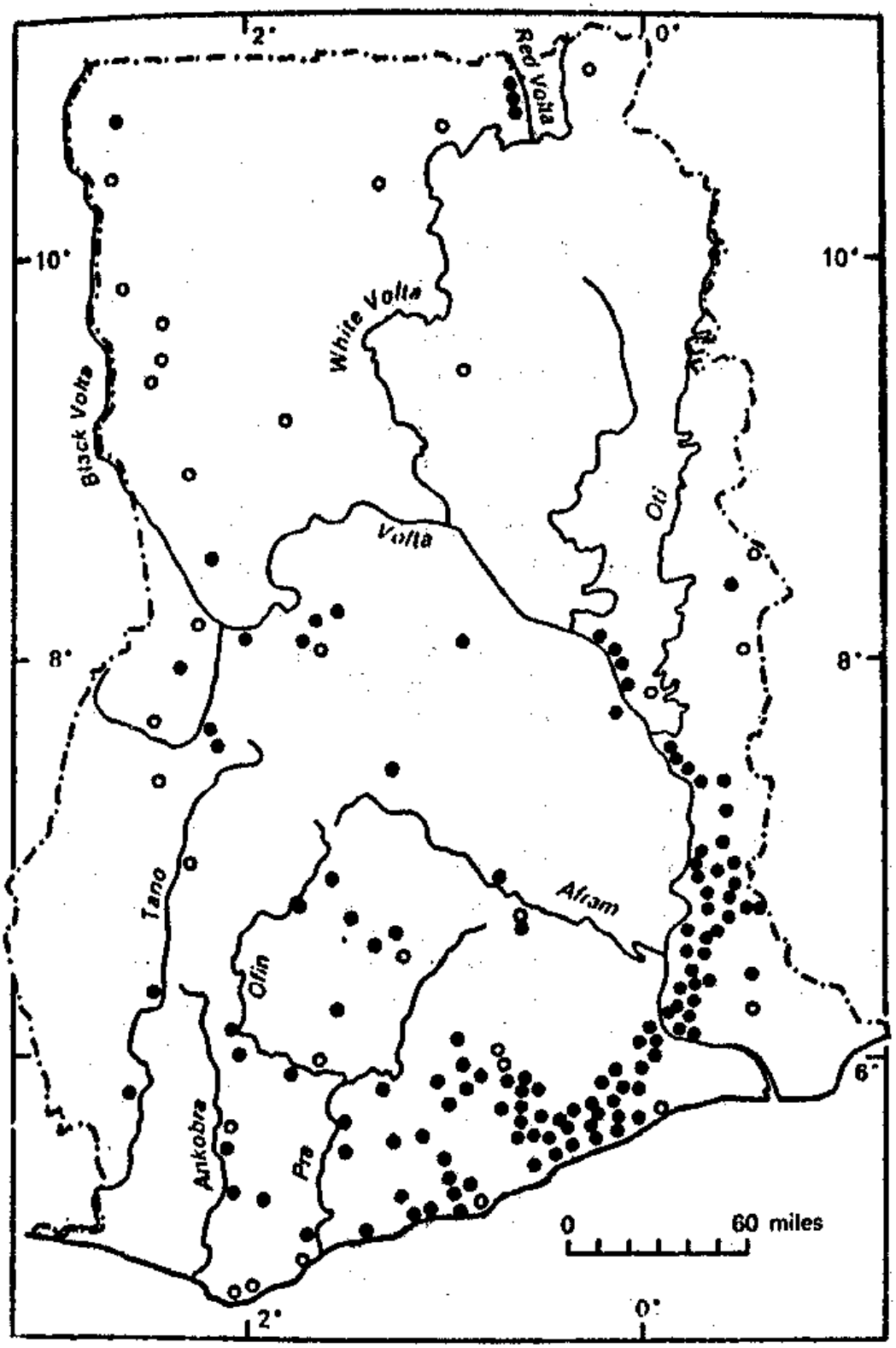

SOME AKAN FOREST STATES c1700
3°
2°
1°
7°
6°
5°
KWABRE
SEKYERE
Tafo
KWAMAN
L. Bosumtwi
MANSO BEKWAI
ADANSE
Fomena
SEHWI
DENKYERA
AKYEM
Abankesjeso
ASSIN
TWIFO
WASSA
AOWIN
HEMAN
WASSA
NZIMA
Banyin
AHANTA
EGUAFO
FANTE
STATES
Elmina
Denkyera
Tributary States
Allies
Approximate boundary of Denkyera Kingdom
0 20 40 MILES

O. Davis) showing the distribution of Sangoan sites (Fig. 3) does not preclude the Asante area. Furthermore, the Neolithic culture which was named the "Kintampo Culture"[19] spread through modern Asante with a fair concentration of stone celts in Adanse area.[20] The above archaeological evidence is enough to support the view expressed by Rattray that "The forest belt had probably been their (the Asante) habitat from time immemorial".[21]

If the Asante themselves say that they met the Guan in their new home, then the Guan may probably be associated with the Neolithic people. Dickson suggests that "In view of their (Guan) possible countrywide distribution, could have been direct descendants of the Neolithic population".[22]

However fragmentary the archaeological evidence and unconnected the evidence from oral traditional sources appear, Kwabere, Sekyere, Atwoma and Asante Akyem districts were already occupied before the ancestors of the Asante moved in. Aside from the Guan, there had been an advanced movement of some Twi speakers either from Adanse or elsewhere from the south to this area. For example in Atwoma the Dormaa had established a considerable capital at Suntreso near Kumase. In Asante Akyem, the Akyem Bosome were already there. The Bono at Takyiman had their territory stretching southwards to the environ of present Ofeso. The Guan settlements were founded in parts of Kwabere and Sekyere. Indeed, the Guan tradition claims that before the arrival of the Asante in this area they had established a huge empire stretching from Gongya (Gonja) across the Volta (Firaw) to the coastal districts.[23] The traditional ruler of the Guan was Atara Firaw, whose title Firaw was used by the Asante to identify the Volta river. Atara Firaw had his capital at Gyaneboafo in the Afram plains,[24] to the far east of Asante Region and the north east of the present Kwau (Kwahu) traditional area.

The invaders from Adanse/Amansie had to fight these people who were already on the land. In Atwoma the Dormaa were defeated after several encounters and were driven beyond the Tano river. In Asante Akyem Kwakye Depowa and his Akyem subjects were defeated. Finally the Guan were routed. In all these encounters the ancestors of the Asante drove some of their enemies away and absorbed others. Commenting on the occupation of the modern Asante area by the Asante Bowdich had this to say: "The Ashantee migrated and subjected



4 **Sangoan sites (after O. Davies).** ● certain; ○ doubtful

several Inta districts now forming the northern part of the dominions, and trenched considerably on that declining kingdom now entirely at their mercy".[25]

Looking at the successes of the Asante, one would like to explain why they won most of their encounters. Several factors might have contributed to their many successes which led to the total occupation of their new home. In the first place it appeared these immigrants were better armed than those they met. They moved at the time when the gun warfare was known by well organized states such as Denkyira and Akwamu, who were their (Asante's) adversaries. Furthermore being traders to the coast they had, no doubt, acquired guns with which they deployed against the Guan who might have been ill-equipped militarily. Indeed the Asante tradition[26] says that as they (Asante) used guns, swords and shields and bows/arrows, the Guan only used the last two groups of war implements.

Secondly, the temporary military alliances of the invaders helped a great deal. The importance of this factor lies in the fact that when the ancestors of the Asante moved from Adanse they regarded themselves as the Dwaben, the Mampon, the Nsutą etc., and were bound together by such ties as common origins, customs and language, but politically they only recognised a loose relationship with one another. The basis of their unity later on was the fact that they had to fight for their survival. In time of war against their common enemy, these independent chiefdoms came together temporarily. There are a few examples of such temporary unions. Adu Gyamfi of Wonoo (from the Bretuo clan) assisted Obiri Yeboah of Kwaman (from the Oyoko clan) to fight the Dormaa in Atwoma. Later the combined forces of Dwaben (Oyoko), Kwabere (mixture of clans), and Kwaman (Oyoko) routed the Dormaa and drove them away beyond the Tano river. In Sekyere the combined forces of Kumawu, Beposo, as well as Agogo from Asante Akyem marched against Atara Firaw from the west, while Nkwatia and Pitiko from Kwau zone fought from the east.[27]

The last relevant factor might have been sheer determination, because having been rendered homeless, they needed somewhere to stay as a people. They knew what it was like to be homeless or vice versa. Fynn

rightly suggests that "land hunger was the fundamental factor which united the immigrants (ancestors of the Asante) against the neighbouring Guan people".[28]

Thus the Asante immigrants drove some of their enemies away and absorbed the others. Commenting on the occupation of this area by the Asante Bowdich wrote: "The Ashantee migrated and subjected several inta districts now forming the northern part of the dominions, and trenched considerably on that declining kingdom, now entirely at their mercy".[29] It appears Bowdich was not referring to the Guan kingdom, because that was not the only kingdom the Adanse immigrants had to fight. They also fought the Dormaa and the Akyem. These immigrants, therefore, built on the ruins of the Guan, the Dormaa and Akyem Kotoku. Furthermore, these early victories gave them the awareness of strength in unity.

EARLY ASANTE SETTLEMENTS AND THE FORMATION OF THE (AMANTUO) STATES (BEFORE 1700)

A close study of the settlements reveals that most of the early settlements did not spring up at their present sites all at once. The general pattern of the movement from Adanse to their new places appeared to have been as follows: as they journeyed northwards, they stopped at certain places on their way, until finally settled at their modern sites. A few examples will illustrate this point. The people of Ofeso moved from Adanse and first settled in Akyem Abuakwa. From Akyem they journeyed northwards to Edweso where a section stayed. Then leaving Tafo behind, they pushed northwards to the banks of the river Ofe where they founded Ofeso Tutuase, Ofeso Annow, Asamankama etc. The Efidwaase, led by their ancestral leader, Mposo Frempon, started from Ayaase in Adanse and following the ancient trade route to the north, stopped at Asokore Mampon in Kwabere. From there they moved to their present site. In the case of Mampon they started from Ahensan, and stopped at Amoafro Bogyawe, then at Kodiekrom, Takwa Buoho in Kwabere, then still pressing northwards reached Akrofoso (old Mampon). The Oyoko clan who lived at Santemanso also moved to found settlements such as Bekwai,

Kumase and Dwaben. At this early period, there appeared to have been a great deal of movements of people and shifting of settlements.

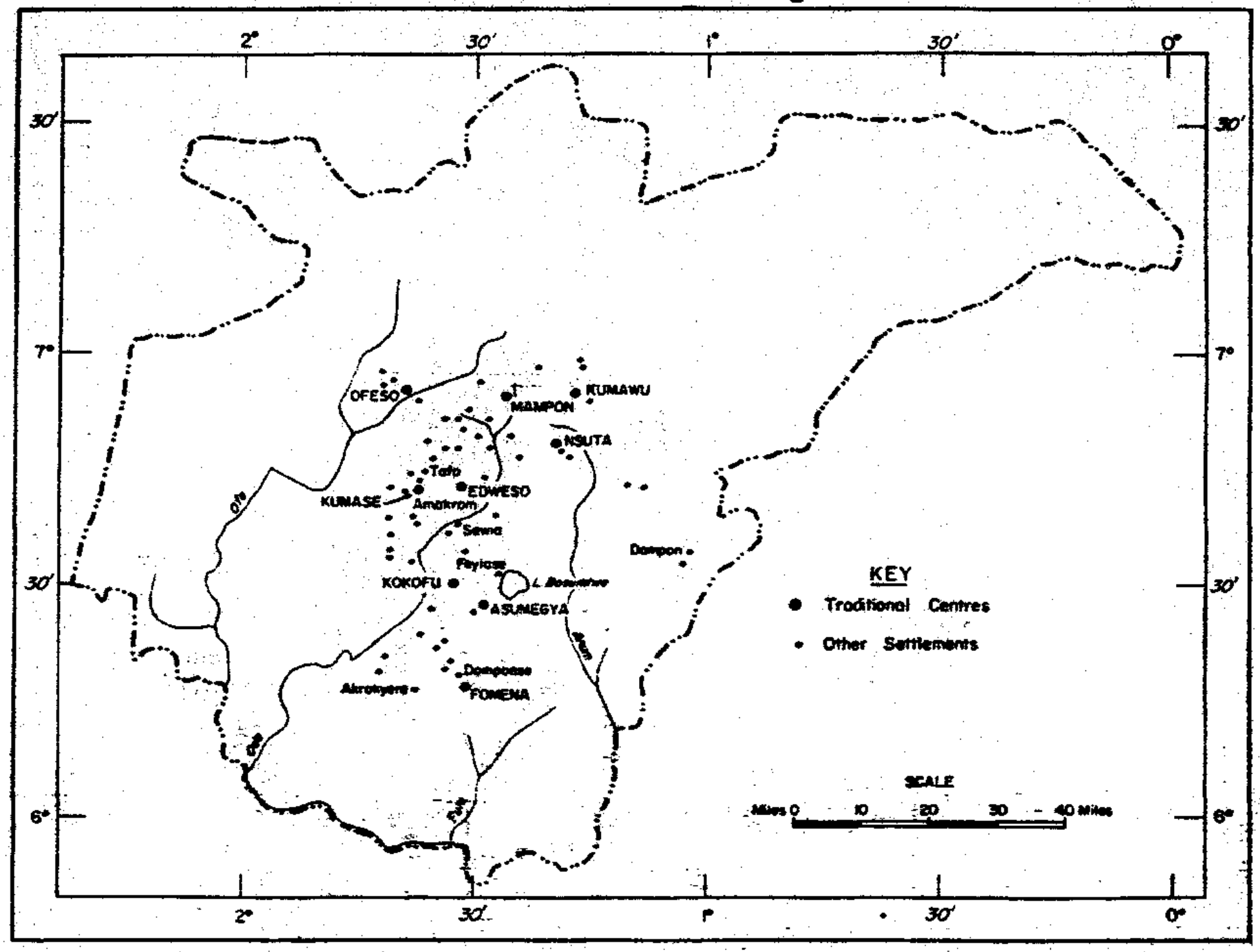
It seems by the beginning of the second half of the seventeenth century, the earliest settlements had been founded or were in the process of being formed. Some of the early settlements to be founded were Wonoo, Dwaben, Atwea, Akrofoso, Anyinasu, Agona Akyempem, Kumawu, Kumase, Kaase, Ofeso etc. (Fig. 4).

A few of the ancestral leaders were able to build considerable settlements because of the large followings they had. As these leaders were Abirempon (literally lords) their settlements became the logical traditional capitals. Some of the large primary settlements or the seats of the powerful Abirempon were Kumase, Mampon, Dwaben and Kumawu. Some of these traditional capitals were reported to be very large and had seventy-seven streets, e.g. Kumawu.[30]

There were other settlements of considerable sizes, but which were not capitals, especially in Kwabere, such as Wonoo, Mamponten, Antoa, Faobaware, Kenyase, Sakora-Wonoo, Bonwere[31] etc. It was the same area bounded by the Pra, the Ofe and the Oda rivers where the Akan developed some of their basic political and social institution,[32] settlements were small principalities entirely independent of one another.

At this period some half-a-dozen of the tribal units had assumed sufficient size and importance to cause them to be known as Amantuo i.e. groups of Aman or tribes. These were Asumenya, Dwaben, Kumawu, Mampon, Kumase and Ofeso.[33] Nsuta, Kokofu, Bekwai and Agona were all in existence but were unimportant as Amantuo. These states independent of one another.[34] They consisted of the capital town and several small settlements which attached themselves to the capital for protection. The name of the capital settlement became the name of the state e.g. Mampon-Mman, Dwaben-Mman, Kumawu-Mman etc. They were civic-cum-military in outlook. In time of war, all the settlements under a particular head fought as a unit. Politically, they all served Denkyira as individual entities.

ASANTE : SETTLEMENTS c 1700



FOOTNOTES

1. Claridge, W.W., A History of the Gold Coast & Ashanti, Vol.I, (London 1915), p.12.

2. Meyerowitz, E., The Akan Traditions of Origin (1952), pp. 124-129.

   Idem The Akan of Ghana.

   Idem "The Akan Oral Traditions" in Universitas June 1962, Vol.V., No.2.

   Ward, W.E.F., A History of Ghana (London 1958) Chapts. 3 and 4.

3. Rattray, R.S., The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland (OUP, 1932), I, XX.

   Dickson, K.B., A Historical Geography of Ghana (OUP, 1969), pp. 14-15.

4. Reindorf, C.C., The History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti (Basel 1896), p.48.

5. Daaku, K.Y., Oral Traditions of Adanse (Legon 1969), p.1.

6. Refer Ghana Notes and Queries No.9, 1966.

7. Kumah, J.K., "The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Denkyira", G.N.Q. No.9, 1966, p.34.

8. Ibid.

9. Rattray, R.S., Ashanti Law and Constitution (1929), p.253.

10. Agyeman-Dua, J., Bonwere Stool History, I.A.S., ACC. No.148.

11. Rattray, R.S., op. cit., p.217.

12. Wilks, Ivor, "The Northern Factor in Ashanti: Begho and Mande" in Journal of African History, II, 1, 1961.

13. Fynn, J.K., "The Rise of Ashanti" in Ghana Notes and Queries No.9, 1969, p.25.

14. Bowdich, T.E., Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee (London 1819), p.229.

15. Fynn, J.K., op. cit.

16. Osei Tutu, the founder of Asante nation, learnt the craft of chiefship from the courts of the Kings of Denkyira and Akwamu.

17. Rattray, R.S., Ashanti Law and Constitution, p.72.

18. Dickson, op. cit., pp. 3-13.

19. Davis, O., "The Invaders of Northern Ghana", Universitas (Legon 1961), IV, 5.

    Dickson, K.B., op. cit., p.11.

20. Ibid., p.12.

21. Rattray, R.S., The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland (OUP 1932), I, XX.

22. Dickson, K.B., op. cit., p.14.

23. a) Agyeman-Dua, J., Kwamang Stool History, I.A.S., ACC. NO. AS 169.

    b) Idem Beposo Stool History, I.A.S. ACC. NO. AS 195.

24. a) Ameyaw, K., 'Kwahu - An Early Forest State, G.N.Q. No.9, 1966, p.44.

    b) Painter, C., "The Guan and West African Historical Reconstruction", G.N.Q. No.9, 1966, p.62.

c) Rattray, R.S., Ashanti Law and Constitution, p.218.

d) Efa, E., Forosie (Stough 1958), pp. 7-8.

e) Agyeman-Dua, J., Stool Histories of Kwamang, Beposo, Agogo, Kumawu.

25. Bowdich, T.E., op. cit., p.170.

26. Personal interviews with Barima Owusu-Ansah, Cultural Advisor to the National Cultural Centre, Kumasé.

27. Ameyaw, K., op. cit.

28. Fynn, J.K., op. cit., p.25.

29. Bowdich, T.E., op. cit.

30. Battray, R.S., Ashanti Law and Constitution, Chapt. VIII.

31. Boaten, K., A Historical Geography of Kwabere (Legon 1967). An unpublished B.A. dissertation, p.5. Adu Gyamfi the founder of Wonoo was so powerful in Kwabere that he was made a regent at Kumase after the death of Obiri Yeboah and was instrumental in crowning Osei Tutu, the founder of Asante nation. But he could not subjugate rulers such as Sarkodie Date Asenso of Antoa and Kagya of Mamponten.

32. Boahen, A.A., "The Origins of the Akan", Ghana Notes and Queries, (G.N.Q.), No.9, 1966, pp. 9-10.

33. Rattray, R.S., op. cit., p.73.

34. Ward, W.E., A History of the Gold Coast (London 1945), p.109.